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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND GERMAN BUSINESS CULTURE

In a standard business German course, students learn about the appropriate language for business contexts, and in some cases they learn about business culture appropriate to certain German business situations. However, is this adequate to make our students proficient enough to work in a German company? In this paper I want to demonstrate that appropriate language and culture skills are not sufficient to make our students proficient enough to accomplish this task. In addition to these two skills, students need an awareness of intercultural differences in order for them to be proficient and competent to work and conduct business in a German environment.

Intermediate German business courses tend to emphasize a thorough introduction to business vocabulary, a good review of German grammar, and an introduction to business situations that students would probably encounter doing business in Germany. However, culture (with a little “c”) is rarely discussed unless it is essential to a business situation, much less cultural differences found between American and German business cultures. Yet business German studies should provide intermediate learners with an introductory look at intercultural communication for business. Before looking at two examples of how this can be done, the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning will be examined.

THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CULTURE

For many teachers culture is often that added extra, taught when and if there is enough time to cover it in class. Many instructors believe that the other aspects of language must come first. Generally, students are taught to bridge the gap between their own culture and the new one. But

what we really need to do is teach learners how to enter the other culture on its own terms. We must help students to discover and negotiate the boundaries of reality in this new culture and simultaneously prepare them to re-enter their own (Kramersch, 1993). Accomplishing this during a student's academic career is a challenge. However, this is seldom attempted during this period of time. Therefore, it needs to be done in business German courses. Unfortunately, many German programs only offer one business course. Consequently, it is essential to accomplish as much of this as possible in one course.

The *national standards* recommend five goal areas for foreign language teaching and learning—Communication, Communities, Connections, Cultures, and Comparisons. Fantini (1999) maintains that all of these can be characterized as *intercultural competence*. He defines this as the ability that allows individuals to function effectively and appropriately in several languages and cultures.

According to Galloway (1999), our commitment to developing an intercultural mind may require the refocusing of energies and the move from lower-level instructional mechanics to “mature” educational outcomes, deep learning processes, and complex thinking traits that benefit lifelong learning. This means we need to provide our students with intercultural competence in order for them to operate appropriately in the German business world. Part of this can be achieved by using material meant for native-speakers appropriate for the foreign language (FL) learner's level. In a business context, knowing the appropriate manners for working together with German colleagues is a good example of this.

In addition, the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* recommend that learning culture should include an understanding of the practices and products of a culture through the perspectives of that culture in the FL learner (Lange 1999, Fantini 1999, Galloway 1999).¹ Galloway (1999) asserts that the *Standards* envision a meaningful interdependence that results in relationships between practices and perspectives, and products and perspectives.

Appropriately recognizing and applying these differences is not enough for the learner according to the Standard for intercultural competence. Beyond the students' recognition of these differences, it is

¹Wells (1994) defines products, practices and perspectives as “resources” and Even-Zohar (1997) as “repertoire.”

very important they be able to apply this information to products, practices and perspectives of their own native culture. For example, discussing with students how people behave in a given business situation in the States can serve as an introduction to German behavior in the same or similar situation (for example, appropriate behavior for negotiations). Fantini maintains that this allows the learners to look back on their own culture from a new vantage point while exploring the new language/culture.

It goes without saying that intercultural competence is necessary for a foreign language learner to be successful in the German business world. This is an essential aspect of being proficient in professional German. However, how can we best provide our students with intercultural competence? Schraw, Wade, and Kardash (1993) have found that students are better able to retain the content of a text if they are provided with a task dealing with the material contained in the text. Quite simply, a task reinforces the information the students need to learn from the text. Therefore, having students work with tasks is an efficient and effective method for teaching cultural material. In the following two examples for intercultural competence, tasks for each example will be supplied. Before looking at these, we should review the task-based approach.

THE TASK-BASED APPROACH

Recently the task-based approach has been receiving more and more recognition. Stemming from the communicative approach with primary focus on the negotiation of meaning rather than form² the task-based approach has had problems defining what a task is. However, a consensus among specialists (Lee, 1995, 2000, Nunan, 1989, Willis, 1996) indicates that a task needs to involve communicative language use with focus placed on meaning rather than on linguistic forms. A task can be either communicative or non-communicative, even though it is sometimes hard to differentiate between the two since they are interrelated (Nunan, 1989).

In language teaching/learning a task does not have to involve directly the production of language. Richards, Platt and Weber's definition of

²For detailed discussions of this approach see Larsen-Freeman, 1986, 123–140; Brumfit & Johnson 1979; Brumfit, 1986; Higgs & Ray, 1982, 57–80; Johnson & Morrow, 1981; Littlewood, 1979; Widdowson, 1979; Widdowson, 1990, 117–125, 157–180.

“task” confirms this, even though their definition refers explicitly to language. They define a task as an activity that results in the processing or understanding of information (i.e., as a response). A variety of task types makes language teaching more communicative because it supplies a purpose for activities that go beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

The two types of tasks are “Pedagogic” and “real-world.” Pedagogic tasks do not explicitly prepare the learner for real world communication. “Real-world” tasks are likely to happen in real life, i.e. problem solving or decision-making (Breen 1987). The tasks presented here are “real-world” tasks.

A common link between these two forms is the communicative use of language (Nunan, 1989, Foster, 1999). In both types the learner is focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure. In a task the purpose of the activities is to foster in the learner use of the target language in real communication in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996).

In the task-based framework, there are three phases: pre-task, task cycle and language focus (Willis, 1996). The first phase serves as an introduction to the topic and task, and it can simultaneously activate topic-related words and phrases. However, students also need to be provided with information about cultural differences pertaining to the topic in this phase.

The task cycle is divided into three parts: the task, planning and report. Students do the task, according to Willis, in pairs or small groups. However, some tasks can also be done individually. During the planning stage, students prepare their report to the whole class. This includes how they performed the task, and their decision or solution to the presented problem. Then the reports are presented to the class, or written reports are exchanged and results are compared.

Language focus makes up the last phase in which students examine and discuss various items of the material. The teacher can also practice new words, phrases and patterns found in the data during or after the analysis.

A DIFFERENCE IN TIME AND DETAIL ORIENTATION

Hall and Hall (1990), and Hedderich (1999) found in surveys they conducted with German and American businesspeople that there are

major differences in German and American concepts of how business should be conducted. For example, they found that Germans tend to be more slow-paced and more detail-oriented whereas Americans are more fast-paced and much less interested in details.³ Stahl, Langeloh, and Kühlmann advise German businesspeople interested in working in the USA to be aware of the same differences. Hedderich (1999) states that:

...these points were major sources of friction between the two sides. In the German firms, the planning process of a project tends to be long and very detail oriented. Plans are not implemented until they have been reviewed thoroughly. In the words of one American chemist: “The German will say ‘Let’s try it one more time’; the Americans think Germans are testing things to death.” (162)

In addition to these two differences, Lewis (1996) points out that “Germans, when explaining something, like to lay a proper foundation.⁴ For them events in the present are a result of the past. Historical context is important” (213). In order to adequately prepare our students to be interculturally competent enough to work in a German environment, we must train them to be aware of such cultural differences.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

The following exercises have been developed to make students more aware of the importance of a company’s history and structure and also to make students implicitly aware of time and detail. They lead into the second cultural difference, communication style. The first exercise functions as an introduction to the history of Meyers Chip AG in Berlin, a fictitious company. As an introduction, students read the three headlines and speculate on what the content for each could be (pre-task).⁵

³This is only in comparison of Germans to Americans. The time and detail orientation would be different if Germans were compared to another cultural group.

⁴This is the same aspect that is referred to in the above quote as the “planning process.”

⁵ Which phase of the task-based framework will be indicated in brackets after the introduction to each exercise.

Firma restrukturiert
Neue Firma für Relais gegründet
Firmenleiter gibt auf

Then students complete the exercise: “Pressemitteilung” (task cycle) (see fig. 1). This exercise provides students with some historical background to Meyers Chip AG which will be used in a later activity.

<p style="text-align: center;">Pressemeldung!</p> <p>Welche Schlagzeile passt welchem Inhalt?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Der Tagesspiegel</p> <p>In Berlin-Spandau wurde gestern bekannt gegeben, dass Dr. Johannes Meyer ein Unternehmen für Relais gegründet hat. Er strebt eine enge Zusammenarbeit mit der Siemens AG an und hat Spandau deshalb als Standort ausgewählt.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Die Berliner Morgenpost</p> <p>Meyers Chip AG gab gestern bekannt, dass ihre Firma neu strukturiert wird. Das alte Linien-System wird durch Segmente ersetzt. Die einzelnen Abteilungen sind nicht mehr für die ganze Firma zuständig, sondern nur für jedes Produktsegment. Beispielsweise hat jetzt jedes Segment seine eigene Qualitätssicherung.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Die Berliner Zeitung</p> <p>Gestern wurde von einer Pressesprecherin der Meyers Chip AG der Verkauf des Unternehmens bekanntgegeben. Meyer sieht sich aus Gesundheitsgründen nicht mehr in der Lage, die Firma zu führen. Die westdeutsche Firma Pro-Relais GmbH wird neuer Eigentümer. Wie die Leitung von Pro-Relais bereits vor Wochen betonte, wird die hervorragende Leitung von Herrn Dr. Johannes Meyer prinzipiell weitergeführt.</p>
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Figure 1: Pressemitteilung (task one).

Once students have finished this task, the teacher should discuss with them which headline matches what story and why they made their choices (language focus).

If students are not already familiar with the various types of companies in Germany like AG (Aktiengesellschaft) or GmbH (Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung), this would be the time to introduce them (pre-task). (See fig. 2) for an example of AG.

Aktiengesellschaften (AGs) haben in der Bundesrepublik eine beträchtliche Bedeutung: So gut wie ohne Ausnahme besitzen alle deutschen Großunternehmen diese Rechtsform. Insgesamt gibt es mehr als 3.000 AGs (Stand 1998), und von diesen wiederum sind rund 700 Unternehmen an der Börse notiert. Die Rechtsform der AG wird vor allem deshalb gewählt, weil sich AGs an der Börse über die Ausgabe von neuen Aktien relativ leicht große Mengen an Kapital beschaffen können. Typisch für die AG ist folgendes:

- Sie ist eine juristische Person und zählt zu den Kapitalgesellschaften.
- Die Gründung einer AG wird durch eine (sog. **kleine AG**) oder mehrere Personen vorgenommen.
- Das Grundkapital muß mindestens 100.000 DM betragen. Es ist die Summe der Nennwerte aller von den Aktionären erworbenen Aktien. Der Nennwert einer Aktie muß mindestens 5 DM betragen.
- Die AG als juristische Person haftet mit ihrem Vermögen für die Schulden der Gesellschaft. Das Risiko eines Aktionärs beschränkt sich auf den Verlust des Wertes seiner Aktien.
- Organe einer AG sind die Hauptversammlung (Versammlung

der Aktionäre), der Vorstand (Geschäftsführung der Gesellschaft) sowie der Aufsichtsrat (Kontrollorgan für den Vorstand).

Figure 2: Description of an Aktiengesellschaft. (Taken from Mühlbradt 25.)

Once students have learned this background information, the following listening comprehension exercise would be appropriate (pre-task). The dialogue takes place between an American working at Meyers Chip AG and a consultant of the same firm (see fig. 3).⁶

Die Fertigung	
Herr Schmidt	Schmeckt's?
Daniel	Ja, ganz lecker. Die deutsche Küche finde ich herrlich.
Herr Schmidt	Ja, sie kann sehr gut sein. Vor Jahren war die Kantine hier viel besser.
Daniel	Viel besser?
Herr Schmidt	Ja, wesentlich. Aber damals war auch in der Firma einiges anders.
Daniel	Was war denn anders?
Herr Schmidt	Der Aufbau. Vor etwa 5 Jahren haben wir dann restrukturiert.
Daniel	Was wurde denn geändert?
Herr Schmidt	Vor der Restrukturierung waren alle Abteilungen für alle Produkte zuständig. Es gab beispielsweise einen Vertrieb und eine Qualitätssicherung für den ganzen Betrieb. Unsere Produktion war damals auch wesentlich kleiner als heute.
Daniel	Wie hat es eigentlich angefangen?
Herr Schmidt	Meyers Chip AG wurde vor 30 Jahren von Herrn Dr. Johannes Meyer gegründet. Herr Dr. Meyer war Ingenieur und hatte gute Kontakte zur Siemens AG. Er hat eine gute Zusammenarbeit mit Siemens aufgebaut. Herr Dr. Meyer gründete eine kleine Firma für Relais. Zu der Zeit war es in Westberlin sehr günstig ein neues Unternehmen auf die Beine zu bringen.

⁶This is only a portion of the complete dialogue between Daniel and Herr Schmidt.

Figure 3: Die Fertigung.

Whether this dialogue is used as a listening comprehension or reading exercise, students' comprehension of the material should be checked. The comprehension check can be done by introducing the dialogue with the following directions (see fig. 4).

Daniel und Herr Schmidt essen zusammen in der Kantine. Herr Schmidt erzählt über Meyers Chip AG.

- Hören Sie sich das Gespräch zwischen Daniel und Herrn Schmidt an. Welche Ereignisse aus den obigen Pressemitteilungen werden im Gespräch erwähnt?

Figure 4: Comprehension exercise.

To complete this section on historical overview, time, and detail orientation, students can be given the following task which requires them to put historical events of Meyers Chip AG in the correct order on a time line (task cycle) (see fig. 5). This exercise can be completed by discussing with students their choices (language focus).

Historischer Überblick

Bringen Sie die historischen Ereignisse der Meyers Chip AG in die richtige Zeitfolge.

1970	⇓ Verkauf der Firma an Pro-Relais
	⇓ Gründung der Meyers Chip AG von Herrn Dr. Meyer
	⇓ Restrukturierung
1990	⇓ Umwandlung in eine AG
	⇓ Erkrankung von Herrn Dr. Meyer
1995	⇓ ein neuer Standort in Prag
2000	⇓ Umzug nach Plänterswald

Figure 5: Historical overview (task two).

A DIFFERENCE IN COMMUNICATION STYLE

Hedderich (1999) found in his study that the variations in time and detail can be found in different styles of communication. One example he presented was a culture clash in presentations. German presentations tended to be long, including historical development of the company or project, and contained numerous details. American presentations tended

to be shorter, animated and started with a joke. Americans focused on the action to be taken, supplied key information at the beginning, and provided less detail (Hedderich, 1999). Stahl, Langeloh, and Kühlmann caution German businesspeople to be aware of such differences when working with American counterparts in order to make their business encounters more successful. This suggestion should not be a one-way street. Americans should also be aware of what is important for their German counterparts in order to be more successful in their business endeavors. Making both sides aware of these differences in communication style can help prevent a breakdown in communication.

The introduction to communication style is contained in another dialogue between Daniel and Herr Schmidt (pre-task) (see fig. 6). In this dialogue Daniel is interested in getting more detailed information about the company because he will be giving a presentation to a group of German interns later.⁷

⁷This is only a portion of the complete dialogue.

Die Firmenstruktur der Meyers Chip AG	
Daniel und Herr Schmidt sitzen noch in der Kantine und reden weiter über Meyers Chip AG.	
Daniel	Wie sah die Firmenstruktur damals aus? Ich halte in einigen Tagen einen kleinen Vortrag über die Geschichte der Firma für die neuen Azubis.
Herr Schmidt	Jetzt verstehe ich.
Daniel	Mir wurde schon gesagt, dass ein Firmenprofil in einem Vortrag über die Firma sehr wichtig in Deutschland ist. Ohne das Firmenprofil ist so ein Vortrag nicht komplett.
Herr Schmidt	Ja, das stimmt. Ohne das Firmenprofil ist so ein Vortrag für viele sehr ärgerlich, weil man hier wissen will, mit wem man zu tun hat. Begonnen hat alles mit ein paar Ingenieuren und einer Sekretärin. Herr Dr. Meyer war damals der Leiter der Firma. Er hat eine kleine Anlage in Spandau nicht weit weg von Siemens gemietet.
Daniel	Und dann ging's los?
Herr Schmidt	Richtig. Herr Dr. Meyer war ein sehr intelligenter Geschäftsmann und hat seine Karten immer gut und richtig gespielt.
Daniel	Was ist aus ihm geworden?
Herr Schmidt	Er hat die Firma geleitet, bis er vor etwa 10 Jahren sehr krank wurde. Er und seine Frau haben nie Kinder gehabt, also keine Nachfolger in der Familie und der Firma. Als er krank wurde, hat er die Firma verkauft.
Daniel	War es eine Fusion?
Herr Schmidt	Nein, wir wurden regelrecht verkauft und ein paar Jahre danach wurden wir in eine AG umgewandelt und sind dann in den Osten umgezogen.
Daniel	Und Sie? Was ist Ihre Rolle in der Firmengeschichte?

Figure 6: Detailed information for a presentation.

Once students have discussed the situation and the information in the dialogue, they then can be introduced to more cultural information pertaining to this topic (pre-task) (see fig 7).

Kultur-Aspekte

Firmenprofil

Wenn sich ein neuer Geschäftspartner einer deutschen Firma vorstellt, wird zuerst ein ausführliches Firmenprofil präsentiert. So eine Präsentation zu unterlassen, wird als schlecht vorbereitet und nicht glaubwürdig angesehen. Im Allgemeinen will eine deutsche Firma genau wissen, mit wem sie zu tun hat. Dies liegt vielleicht daran, dass Deutsche im Allgemeinen sehr genau sind und alles korrekt machen wollen. Für Amerikaner ist ein ausführliches Firmenprofil nicht so bedeutsam und wird in einer Firmenpräsentation nur angeschnitten. Man kann sich bei diesem Vergleich gut vorstellen, was passiert, wenn diese zwei Einstellungen zusammentreffen. Die Amerikaner verstehen nicht, warum Deutsche sich solange mit dem Firmenprofil beschäftigen, und die Deutschen verstehen nicht, warum die Amerikaner gleich Geschäft machen wollen. Deutsche möchten auch ein Bild vom Geschäftspartner gewinnen, das Hintergrundwissen einschließt, um eine gute Basis für eine Zusammenarbeit zu finden. Sie wollen genau wissen, mit wem sie zu tun haben, um eine Vertrauensbasis zum Geschäftspartner aufzubauen. Amerikaner sind auf Schnelligkeit eingestellt und Deutsche auf Details und Genauigkeit.

Figure 7: Firmenprofil.

Finally, in order to provide students more experience on this subject, they can complete the following exercise (task cycle) (see fig. 8). This activity should provide good discussion material and a chance for the instructor to inform students on the topic (language focus).

Zur Diskussion

Welche Probleme kann man in den folgenden Szenarios erwarten, wenn Deutsche und Amerikaner zusammen kommen und keine Kulturkenntnisse über den Geschäftspartner haben?

- (x) Amerikanische und deutsche Geschäftsleute führen eine Besprechung über ihre Produktlinien. Die Deutschen präsentieren ihre Produkte sehr ausführlich, die Amerikaner aber nicht.
- (y) In einer Sitzung zwischen Amerikanern und Deutschen haben die Amerikaner den Deutschen gesagt, dass Sie alles Mögliche für die deutsche Firma machen werden. Die Deutschen nehmen die Aussagen von den Amerikanern als bare Münze.

Figure 8: Intercultural differences (task three).

CONCLUSION

Seelye (1993) has suggested that in culture instruction a teacher should identify a limited number of specific competencies that encapsulate the intention of each of the selected purposes. These competencies can later be used as end-of-course indicators of student achievement. However, in most language instruction these competencies tend to ignore intercultural differences. Abrate (1998) maintains:

...mastery of appropriate cultural behavior and awareness of a culture's value system and traditions is essential to knowing how to respond in any given situation, to participate intelligently in interactions with speakers of the language, and to make informed observations and interpretations of the culture. (23)

In order to accomplish this, Hager (1994) has suggested how to teach students to generate behavior for the new culture.

If students are not aware of such intercultural differences and how they should react to them, there is no possible way students can be proficient enough in German culture to be truly successful in the German business world. Therefore, I believe it is our responsibility as teachers of languages (here German) to be sure that our professional students are not only trained in German business culture but also in appropriate cultural differences. In my opinion the above activities are good examples for doing this.

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